

6th January 2021

Gifts

“By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation ... He believed that it was for the man of letters to recover these epiphanies ... seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and effervescent of moments.”

James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

Today the Christian Church celebrates the Feast of the Epiphany, recalling the visit of the Magi to Bethlehem, to present their gifts to Jesus. For centuries in our country, it marked the end of the twelve days of Christmas.

“Epiphany” comes from *epipháneia* meaning manifestation or appearance. In classical Greek it was used for the appearance of the dawn or an enemy in war, but especially of a revelation of a deity to a worshiper. Epiphany doesn’t just signify the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh brought by the three Magi from the East, familiar to us from countless Nativity Plays. It is much more a marking of a gift *to* us.

William Chatterton Dix was a hymn-writer from Bristol who spent much of his life in Glasgow as manager of a marine insurance company. His best-known hymn, *As With Gladness Men of Old*, written on Epiphany in 1859 when he was 22, encourages us to think of the gifts we can offer.

*As they offered gifts most rare at that manger rude and bare,
So may we with holy joy, pure, and free from sin's alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring, Christ, to Thee, our heavenly King*

Only seven years later, Dix was struck with a near fatal illness and became severely depressed. Yet he was to draw strength from a faith which had inspired him to include this verse in his great hymn:

*In the heavenly country bright, need they no created light;
Thou its light, its joy, its crown, Thou its sun, which goes not down.
There for ever may we sing alleluias to our King.*

On this Feast of the Epiphany, however much we think of the gifts of service we can *offer*, pause with Dix and reflect on the gift we are *given*, in “the most delicate and effervescent of moments”, as Joyce wrote, of the light and joy of the revelation of the blessing of God.

A prayer for today

*Lord, in these trying times, help us to “recover these epiphanies”,
for we need them perhaps more than ever before. Amen.*

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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